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ABSTRACT

Young people need a gymnasium for the expression of their passions: Shakespeare provides it. People who do not exercise their feelings cannot develop the strength to exercise their passions, and unexercised passions can seem to atrophy. It is even more likely that unexercised and unexpressed passions leak into pathways of the body chemistry where they turn to poison and make individuals ill. The physical and psycho-physical act of speaking Shakespeare can have a therapeutic effect on the emotional health of the speaker. In "Richard III," Richard's mother, the Duchess of York, and Queen Elizabeth need lessons from the old Queen Margaret before they can suitably confront the evil personified in Richard. Margaret delivers a magnificent enumeration of her son's disastrous life. Shakespeare can be the tutor in emotional eloquence for those who exercise with the barbells of his language. A first class with students who had nothing but contempt and loathing for Shakespeare was devoted to insults. The so-called "positive" emotions--happiness, love, tenderness--tend to be given precedence in society's judgment, but if equality is not observed within the emotional realm, the so-called "negative" emotions may well stage a coup and overthrow the government. Shakespeare and Company's work with young people has shown time and again that troubled and depressed students can find themselves in Shakespeare. In the last 20 years Shakespeare and Company's education program has grown into a formidable force in the surrounding community, reaching more than 40,000 students and teachers in the northeast United States every year with performances. (NKJ)

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# If Words Be Made of Breath and Breath of Life: Shakespeare as CPR.

by Kristin Linklater

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# IF WORDS BE MADE OF BREATH AND BREATH OF LIFE:
## *Shakespeare as CPR*

Keynote Speech, given by Kristin Linklater, Chair, Theatre Arts Division, School of the Arts, Columbia University. NCTE Conference, March 3, 2000, Bethesda MD.

In the General Introduction to the Riverside Shakespeare Harry Levin says: 'Whether it be as loud as a public proclamation or as muted as a breaking heart, Shakespeare's discourse is intended to be spoken'. You all know this. Some scholars, not as enlightened as Harry Levin, do not. You know that when your students speak Shakespeare, better still, perform his plays, they understand him, or at least begin to. They are very likely to begin a lifelong love affair with him. When you encourage young people to act Shakespeare you encourage them to have courage, and the word 'courage' comes from the same root as the French word 'coeur' -- 'heart'. You give them heart.

In this Age of Irony the hearts that should beat life into our society have become muted not always because they are breaking but because it is not the fashion to exercise the expression of emotion. Communicating information is acceptable; revealing emotion is barely so. When we speak Shakespeare's words out loud, and encourage others to do so, we exercise a larger breath for his large words and we enlarge the capacity and vitality of our lives. You need courage and breath to make loud public proclamations which may serve the body politic, and you need courage and breath to express the sorrow of a breaking heart which is the first step to mending it. Our young people need a gymnasium for the expression of their passions; Shakespeare provides it.

"If words be made of breath
And breath of life I have no life to breathe
What thou hast said to me"

These could be the words of any victim of any kind of abuse that threatens dangerous consequences if the abuse is revealed. And, in such cases, as the breath and words are witheld a portion of the life of the victim dies. But, of course this is Gertrude promising not to breathe a word to Claudius of what Hamlet has said to her.

How does she manage to keep her promise? This question that I pose is not addressed to Gertrude's dilemma -- do her loyalties lie with her husband or with her son -- but to the psycho-physical acts that her mind and body perform

in order to stop the expression of what she knows. We stop ourselves from saying what we want to say by holding the breath on some level and by clenching the jaw, tightening the throat, pulling the tongue back. If we in any way restrict the free flow of breath in and out of the body we restrict our expressive lives. It is almost always the expression of our emotional selves that is thus restricted: our loves, our hates, rages, fears, our sadnesses. Perhaps it wouldn't matter that much were it not for the fact that an experiential knowledge of these emotions is necessary for the expression of that most essential of all human emotions -- compassion, without which a civilization cannot fulfill its highest potential. 'Com-passion' means 'feeling with' and you can't 'feel with' someone else unless you already have some feelings of your own. I stand behind the proposition that civilization is doomed if we hold our breaths and deny our feelings.

If we do not exercise our feelings we cannot develop the strength to exercise our passions and if we don't exercise our passions they can seem to atrophy. But is there such a condition where the passions are concerned - atrophy? It is more likely that unexercised and unexpressed passions leak into pathways of the body chemistry where they turn to poison and make us ill; or that they sit and stew and eventually boil over, burning, scalding, destroying, ungovernably violent because unfamiliar. Is there no middle-ground between illness or violence? Where and how can one safely do emotion exercises?

In Richard III, Richard's mother, the Duchess of York, and Queen Elizabeth need lessons from the old Queen Margaret before they can suitably confront the evil personified in Richard.

O thou well skill'd in curses, stay awhile,
And teach me how to curse mine enemies.

says Elizabeth. Margaret replies:

Forbear to sleep the nights and fast the days;
Compare dead happiness with living woe;
Think that thy babes were sweeter than they were,
And he that slew them fouler than he is.

Today we might rather hear, "you have to learn to let your anger go; move on; join a support group; join Angry People Anonymous; take Prozac". Margaret says: "Be an emotional warrior; go to emotion boot camp and come back

swinging; develop emotional muscle". Of course, Margaret is the supreme sergeant major in such matters; the master-mistress of cursing. Poor Elizabeth says:

My words are dull, O, quicken them with thine!

to which Margaret replies:

Thy woes will make them sharp and pierce like mine.

She knows that eloquence depends on emotional nourishment.

The Duchess of York, brought up differently we suppose, asks plaintively:

Why should calamity be full of words?

And Elizabeth shows she's a quick learner:

Let them have scope! though what they will impart
Help nothing else, yet do they ease the heart.

Shaking off a lifetime of good behavior the Duchess then launches into some splendid cursing:

If so then be not tongue-tied: go with me,
And in the breath of bitter words let's smother
My damned son that thy two sweet sons smother'd.
The trumpet sounds, be copious in exclaims.

In comes Richard:

Who intercepts me in my expedition?

And she's off!

she that might have intercepted thee
(By strangling thee in her accursed womb),
From all the slaughters, wretch, that thou hast done!
Thou toad, thou toad, where is thy brother Clarence
.....

she warms up to a magnificent enumeration of her son's disastrous life:

Thou cam'st on earth to make my life my hell.
A grievous burden was thy birth to me,
Tetchy and wayward was thy infancy;
Thy schooldays frightful, desp'rate, wild and furious,
Thy prime of manhood daring, bold and venturous,
Thy age confirm'd, proud, subtle, sly and bloody...

and she delivers her *coup de grace*:

Bloody thou art, bloody will be thy end;
Shame serves thy life and doth thy death attend.

Shakespeare can be our tutor in emotional eloquence if we exercise with the barbells of his language. His words activate the breathing musculature, stimulate the lips and tongue to articulate the energetic thinking that rides with passionate feeling, his words develop emotional muscle and make us fit to handle our rages, sorrows, loves - to become eloquent.

There is huge pleasure to be derived from speaking Shakespeare's curses and insults. There's even a newish book out - a flip-book entitled 'Thy father is a gor-bellied codpiece' - that allows one to concoct hundreds of one's own insults from Shakespeare's original adjectives and nouns. Of course, nothing can top Shakespeare himself on an insult binge. Here is Kent verbally beating Oswald to a pulp:

Thou art a knave, a rascal, an eater of broken meats, a base, proud, shallow, beggarly, three-suited, hundred-pound, filthy worsted-stocking knave; a lily-livered, action-taking, whoreson glass-gazing, superserviceable, finical rogue; one-trunk-inheriting slave; one that wouldst be a bawd in the way of service, and art nothing but the composition of a knave, beggar, coward, pander, and the son and heir of a mongrel bitch...

and Falstaff and Prince Hal going at it:

Hal: Why thou clay-brained guts, thou knotty-pated fool, thou whoreson, obscene, greasy tallow-catch -. This sanguine coward, this bed-presser, this horse-back-breaker, this huge hill of flesh -

Falstaff: 'Sblood, you starveling, you eel-skin, you dried neat's tongue, you bull's pizzle, you stock-fish! O for breath to utter what is like thee! you tailor's yard, you sheath, you bowcase, you vile standing tuck -

I worked for 12 years with Shakespeare & Company in Lenox, MA and when we first started we had absolutely no money and we offered our services to the local schools, not really because we had any lofty ideas at that time about Shakespeare enriching the lives of youth but because we needed to earn some money. But the first school we forged a relationship with couldn't afford to pay us, so, as a form of barter, the English faculty and a bunch of students would come over to The Mount where we were living hand-to-mouth, heating huge rooms with woodstoves, and they would chop wood with us creating woodpiles of sufficient cordage to see us through long freezing winters. The first class with students who, at that time, had nothing but contempt and loathing for Shakespeare, was devoted to insults. We'd form teams of insult-throwers and pass around hats filled with insults written on slips of paper which were bandied back and forth with ever-increasing energy, volume and delight. We would then teach a few hand-to-hand stage combat moves, emphasizing the code of behavior that goes along with good stage fighting. Then we would do scraps of fight scenes with choral acting --- 3 or 4 people to a character, just to give them courage. Only after that experience could we proceed to love scenes. In the love scenes, team acting (3 or 4 people to each character) was even more essential than for the fight scenes. There was safety in numbers.

Why all this emphasis on expressing anger and being rude, you may ask. Well, although it is an over-simplification of human psychology to say so, it is also often true that anger is a protection against sadness and that sadness comes from the loss of love. Anger is also, of course, a protection against injustice. We need to regard anger as a respected citizen within the democracy of our emotions. The so-called 'positive' emotions, happiness, love, tenderness, tend to be given precedence in society's judgment -- but if equality is not observed within the emotional realm, the so-called 'negative' emotions may well stage a coup and overthrow the government. In an emotional democracy the more vulnerable emotions feel protected by the tough ones. Yet there seems to be less and less understanding nowadays of the part anger plays in young people's lives. Parents seem to do their best (and it's hard to blame them) to stop up the expression of anger in their children. But the only way a child can learn to manage anger is to practise it. And who better to practise on than one's parents. For generations raging, weeping children have been told: "Go to your room and when you've calmed down maybe we can talk about the problem". Or "Don't you ever talk to your mother like that!" So the rage and the tears are made to feel unacceptable and are dislocated from language. Words are only to be spoken in a rational manner. But words belong with emotions and need to

be exercised in the presence of emotion. There's nothing wrong with a shouting match, so long as certain rules are maintained - don't pull higher status; stay in the room; don't resort to blows; listen; give AND take; equal time.

Shakespeare & Company's work with young people has shown time and again that the anti-social ones, the troublemakers, the depressed students, the drop-outs, the outcasts, the rebels can find redemption as they find themselves in Shakespeare. When the roiling, confusing energies of adolescence are given a good outlet in Shakespeare they undergo alchemical change and turn to gold.

In the last 20 years Shakespeare & Company's education program has grown into quite a formidable force in the surrounding community. Students regard being cast in the yearly Shakespeare production as prestigious as being on the football team and the annual Fall Festival of Shakespeare plays, involving between 8 and 12 local high schools and directed by 2-person teams of Shakespeare & Company actor/directors, is now a major cultural event in the Berkshires. It is emphatically a festival - not a competition, but a celebration. I myself have not been part of this work for many years but I watch it with great pride and admiration. Kevin Coleman is the director of the Shakespeare & Company's education program and under his leadership it reaches more than 40,000 students and teachers in the north-east every year with performances, workshops and residencies. Since the program was founded in 1978, more than half-a-million elementary, secondary and undergraduate students have benefited. As we all know, there are multiple educational values in this kind of arts program in schools. Kevin Coleman says: "Our task is to introduce Shakespeare to students in such a way that through him they discover themselves".

The second paragraph of Shakespeare & Company's education program mission statement reads:

> To meet the demands of classical theatre built on language, we must teach students the skills needed to breathe more deeply, free their voices, and commit their bodies through acting, stage combat and Elizabethan dance. We must teach them to speak sublime poetry in their own accents; to listen openly and respond passionately and reflectively; to embrace the multiple points of view expressed in dramatic sitiations; and to be sensitive, flexible and expansive mentally, physically and emotionally. We must help them to become experts at relationships, at honesty and intimacy; to join their energy to the group through responsible conviction - or, through conviction, to stand alone. We must help them to practise both success and failure, to give and receive praise, support and

criticism, and we must lead them to a more vital experience of their own and others' humanity. This is the masterpiece we are committed to creating.

Here is a letter written by a grateful parent to Shakespeare & Company in November 1999:

I'm writing to thank you for making it possible for my family to have Shakespeare become so grand and vivid a part of our lives.

My son, now 15, first encountered Shakespeare in 4th grade when your company artists directed him and his classmates in Hamlet. It was transforming. The students were focused, excited, and purposeful and presented a powerful piece of theatre. We parents watched, deeply moved, realizing with a shock that our children were growing up, that they were eagerly accepting this challenge.

Last year my son again performed Hamlet in the Fall festival, this time with a 14-year-old's different understanding. September had started out as an indifferent, lackluster year until he went to his first audition. He came home that night a different boy, exhilarated, talking nonstop. Thanks to this play his life became engrossing and exciting. Sometimes adolescent emotions are too big for school. A surprising side-effect: he actually got an A in nearly every class, probably because he was forced to structure his time effectively. He now knows the play quite well,can recite large chunks of it, and coolly evaluates the different stage and movie versions he has seen since.

This year The Winter's Tale was a treat. During the final week, whne I picked him up at school at 9 p.m. I asked him whether he was exhausted, and he said no. "I love this," he said, "I wish we could start another play as soon as we finish this one." This is the highest praise, coming from a teenager who seldom confesses to loving anything. Again, he knew the whole play by heart, and often quoted insights his directors shared about the themes.

My 10-year-old daughter meanwhile played Macbeth in her 4th-grade Shakespeare & Company production. She was fierce and fabulous. Now she says she prefers Shakespeare's tragedies to his comedies. She has now seen many Shakespeare plays, so she knows.

I think we will look back on this as one of the outstanding experiences of our children's childhood. It is the sum of many things -- the actual penetration of Shakespeare's unparalleled language; the exploration of large universal themes that kids don't usually have the chance to grapple with; the discipline that theatre always demands; the discovery of a different world on stage; the development of a crazy wonderful family

> working together to create something magnificent. And once you have been lifted up to see this grand perspective, you are never the same again -- you have a way of looking at life that will never leave you.

I think that many teenagers are restored to an experience of their real selves when they take on Shakespeare's characters and speak their words. Their real selves are their larger selves - the selves that they were born with - the selves that expressed what they felt with the ecstatic extremes of the life-force behind them when they were small children. Heart and lungs were pumping at full throttle. And the throttle was open.

The process of education and acculturation that we all undergo modifies and modulates that extreme expression until it calcifies into a habit of inhibition forming the manageable, domesticated characters that we are. We abandon the scope and largesse of the real self; there is severe danger of the death of the real self, the big self, and, dare I say it, the soul. By the time we are teenagers most of us need cardio-pulmonary resuscitation. Shakespeare can be a very good heart doctor. Shakespeare's words pump blood into our hearts and work the bellows of our lungs, resuscitating our souls as we speak. The domesticated self cannot do justice to Shakespeare. We must raise and expand our domestic, daily sense of truth to fill the larger truths that he expresses. We 20th-century folk (the 21st-century is too young to claim folk) are conditioned to live in our heads, to experience the sense of self in the head. This is a very small part of the body. It is only in the last nano-second of human evolution that the experience of thought and language has moved out of the body and into the head. Centuries of oral communication preceded Shakespeare's fecund meeting with the English language, and Elizabethan people had a visceral, physical relationship with language and the process of thinking that we cannot hope to reproduce -- nor do we want to. But, we must be willing to shift our search for meaning in Shakespeare from the head to the body if we are to deeply understand him. His English is 400 years younger than the English we speak today. Red-blooded, strong, muscular, full of the energy of youth. Today's English (both English English and American English) is, by comparison anemic, thin and doddering. Consonants are an endangered species; vowels are merging into one muddy generality.

When we clarify vowels and consonants, we start to clarify thinking -- I don't mean 'good diction' -- I mean the relish and thrill of different sounds playing through the body.

I have emphasized here the physical and psycho-physical act of speaking Shakespeare and highlighted the therapeutic effect such an act can have on the emotional health of the speaker. Gertrude's words suggest that first there is the soul (life), then breath, then words: "If words be made of breath, and breath of life..." Taking this out of context we might then say: "If words be made of breath, and breath of life, then speaking words will make me breathe and live".

□